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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 08 TEL AVIV 000102

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XOX
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JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
USCINCCENT MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

In their lead stories, all media reported that the doctors treating PM Sharon plan to try to rouse him from his induced coma today. To do so, they will gradually reduce the intravenous doses of sedatives that Sharon is receiving. Once he is awake, the doctors will examine his responses to light, sound, and pain, and try to determine the amount of damage he suffered as a result of his cerebral hemorrhage. This morning, the media reported that Sharon appears to be able to breathe independently even before he is awakened. Ha'aretz and other media quoted Dr. Jose Cohen, one of the neurosurgeons who operated on Sharon, as saying on Sunday: "His chances of survival are very high, but his ability to think and draw conclusion will be impaired." Ha'aretz and other media cited criticism by senior physicians on the treatment received by Sharon.

On Sunday, Yediot quoted White House officials as saying that President Bush would prefer Ehud Olmert to be the prime minister of Israel in the post-Sharon period because he is the only one of the candidates who is committed to Sharon's legacy and to making progress on the Roadmap. On Sunday, Yediot reported that Bush is among the world leaders who have made plans to come to Israel in an emergency.

Leading media reported that Vice Premier Shimon Peres will not run for the leadership of Kadima, but that he plans to present himself in Kadima's Knesset list. Ha'aretz reported that Kadima officials predicted last night that Justice Minister Tzipi Livni will win the No.2 spot on the party's list. The officials also predicted that Peres will not be appointed foreign minister in the next government.

Hatzofe quoted FM Silvan Shalom as saying Sunday at the weekly cabinet meeting that East Jerusalem residents will be allowed to vote in the Palestinian legislative elections, but that they will have to do so outside the city limits, probably in Abu Dis. Israel Radio quoted Internal Security Minister Gideon Ezra as saying that police will allow limited propaganda for the elections to be conducted in East Jerusalem. Ha'aretz reported that on Sunday, Hamas signed an accord together with all Palestinian factions that will serve as a code of conduct in the period leading up to the elections. Israel Radio cited the Jordanian newspaper Al-Dustour as saying that PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas is considering resigning if Fatah loses the elections.

Ha'aretz quoted a senior Israeli security official as saying on Sunday that weapons experts in Palestinian terror groups who have received underground training in Lebanon, Syria, and possibly Iran have recently infiltrated the Gaza Strip.

On Sunday, leading media reported that Jirias Jirias, a former local council head of the Western Galilee Arab village of Fassuta, was to be indicted today on espionage charges. Jirias was arrested last month. Citing the German press agency DPA, Ha'aretz reported today on the Iranian Foreign Ministry's denial on Sunday that it had an agent in Israel who aimed to infiltrate the Israeli political system. This morning, Israel Radio cited the Iranian daily Jomhuri Islami as saying that an Israeli spy was arrested in Iran.

Yediot quoted FM Silvan Shalom as saying Sunday at the weekly cabinet meeting that the U.S. Congress has approved USD 2.28 billion in military assistance and USD 240 million in civilian aid to Israel in FY 2006 -- as well as USD 40 million in assistance for immigrant absorption. Shalom was also quoted as saying that the U.S. Congress will maintain its budget for joint security projects, which will amount to USD 600 million this year (in addition to security assistance).

The Jerusalem Post reported that the periodic meeting of the U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation forum, the Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), will convene in Tel Aviv Wednesday, for the first time since the two countries resolved their crisis in defense relations over arms sales to China. The newspaper quoted security officials as saying that the two-day, intensive sessions are expected to focus on strategic regional and global issues, as well as bilateral topics, and that Iran's effort to acquire nuclear weapons and the future of Syria are likely topics. The talks will take place in Tel Aviv and will be co-chaired by Defense Ministry Director-General Jacob Toren and A/S for Political-Military Affairs John Hillen. IDF brass and senior defense officials are expected to attend. In a related development, The Jerusalem Post reported that Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kohler, head of the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency, is visiting the Defense Ministry for a first-hand look at Israeli defense projects.

Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi was quoted as saying in a special article published by Ha'aretz on Sunday that Sharon recognized the best path for this country.

Leading media reported that AG Menachem Mazuz told the cabinet on Sunday that the state should pay financial compensation to Palestinians whose olive trees have been cut down, and then sue the vandals to recoup the costs. Acting PM Ehud Olmert called the destruction of the trees a "criminal act" that needed to be treated with "full force."

On Sunday, Yediot quoted a Sharon associate as saying that by attacking Sharon in a media interview on the evening before his planned angioplasty and demanding investigation of his role in his possible receipt of USD 3 million from Austrian businessman Martin Schlaff, Education Minister Limor Livnat (Likud) served as an "accessory to murder" ... "in the metaphorical sense."

On Sunday, leading media reported that Norwegian Finance Minister Kristin Halvorsen, who is also the leader of Norway's Socialist Left Party, apologized to her prime minister and foreign minister over having publicly backed a consumer boycott of Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians.

Ha'aretz reported that on Sunday, police raided the offices of the extreme right-wing organization known as the Jewish Battalion, in the settlement of Tapuah and in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Post reported that the High Court of Justice is due to hand down on Monday its ruling on the Defense Ministry's proposal for the route of the security fence in the area separating Maccabim-Reut from the Palestinian village of Beit Sira.

During the weekend, media reported that a lawsuit has been filed in New York's Federal Court by a group of American victims of Palestinian terror against National Westminster Bank, a major British bank accused of permitting a recognized Hamas charity fund to open accounts and transfer funds.

Yediot reported that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi Arabian King Abdullah have clarified to Syrian President Bashar Assad that if he does not cooperate with the UN on the matter of the investigation of the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri, they would stop supporting him, thus causing his regime to collapse. The newspaper also quoted former Syrian Vice-President Abdul-Halim Khaddam as saying in an interview with the influential Saudi web site Ilaf that he has further revelations to make

about Assad.

Ha'aretz quoted a Mekorot Water Company official as saying that the company has stopped injecting chlorine gas at a facility near Ashkelon for fear that Palestinian-fired rockets will hit tanks holding the potentially deadly chemical.

Leading media quoted Afghan President Hamid Karzai as saying that his government would forge diplomatic ties with Israel if the Palestinians can form a state of their own. Karzai was also quoted as saying: "May God give [PM Sharon] a longer life."

Hatzofe quoted German Chancellor Angela Merkel as saying that she will not postpone her visit to Israel. She is expected to come to the country at the end of this month.

On Sunday, Maariv and The Jerusalem Post quoted U.S. televangelist Pat Robertson as saying in his 700 Club program on Thursday that Sharon's stroke was a punishment from heaven for the disengagement. The Jerusalem Post reported that the White House and major Jewish organizations condemned Robertson over his remarks.

Mideast:

Summary:

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "[Acting Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert must carry out Sharon's promise and meet with Abbas. That would impart a positive dimension to his newly acquired leadership among many sectors of the Israeli public, as well as among the U.S. administration and international public opinion."

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "The U.S. is left without a practical strategy for the Middle East and needs to redefine its priorities."

The Director of the Interdisciplinary Center's Global Research in International Affairs Center, columnist Barry Rubin, wrote in the Jerusalem Post: "Sharon moved Israel even further toward moderation ... while the Palestinians have gone in the opposite direction.... The two sides are going to continue moving further apart in future."

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "We see this Hajj season as a good time to remind ourselves of the need to welcome voices of reason and encourage Muslim theologians willing to engage Westerners in a spirit of mutual respect."

Block Quotes:

I. "Meeting Abbas"

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (January 9): "In the months before Prime Minister Ariel Sharon fell ill, his spokesmen said that he intended to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). In practice, however, nothing came of these pronouncements. Abbas met with U.S. President George Bush, but did not manage to meet with the Prime Minister of Israel.... [Acting Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert must carry out Sharon's promise and meet with Abbas. That would impart a positive dimension to his newly acquired leadership among many sectors of the Israeli public, as well as among the U.S. administration and international public opinion. Such a meeting should not be viewed as an occasion for negotiations between the two peoples. Not every meeting must yield immediate fruit or major positive results. What is important here is personal contact between the two leaders -- a human 'hotline' that is liable to contribute to the development of mutual understanding, even if it does not immediately bridge the deep gaps between Israel and the Palestinians. Such a meeting has become even more important in light of the wave of Palestinian violence and terror, and Israel's prompt responses.... There are those who fear that a meeting between Olmert and Abbas would play into the hands of Hamas, which would try to claim that Abbas is a captive of the new Zionist leader. But it seems that the benefits likely to ensue from such a meeting immeasurably outweigh the harm, which, it must be hoped, will not ensue at all."

II. "The United States' Sharon-Focused Mideast Strategy Needs To Be Redefined"

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (January 8): "What Sharon's plans really were is now a guessing matter. The U.S. is left without a practical strategy for the Middle East and needs to redefine its priorities. On the Israeli side, the U.S. administration will have to forge a meaningful relationship with Olmert and the new Israeli leadership, trying on the one hand to lend them support and backing, but at the same time ensuring that Sharon's legacy, which in American eyes meant moving forward to a two-state solution, will continue. On the Palestinian side things are even more delicate. The U.S. would like to help Abbas in light of the upcoming elections, but cannot put any pressure on Israel.... This balancing act is now in the hands of Rice and Bush. In the coming weeks and months it is likely they will try to gently embrace Olmert without harming Abbas's standing, and at the same time will try to support the Palestinian leadership without putting Olmert in a difficult political situation. For the Bush administration, which isn't known for mastering the skill of subtle diplomacy, the near future poses a great challenge. Not only will they have to work hard to preserve Sharon's legacy, they will have to first ensure that all sides agree on what this legacy really was."

III. "Moving Apart"

The Director of the Interdisciplinary Center's Global Research in International Affairs Center, columnist Barry Rubin, wrote in the Jerusalem Post (January 9): "The world is about to rethink its views of the whole Arab-Israeli conflict, due to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's past policy shift, his evident departure from politics, and Palestinian developments. The critical variable here is not what has happened to Sharon but a Palestinian political situation which makes any progress toward peace impossible for years to come. Sharon's illness may be distracting attention from the Palestinian crisis, but it is ultimately much less important in shaping the region's future.... There is no group or leader on the [Palestinian] horizon who could impose order; at any rate, doing so would require an even higher level of violence.... It is getting time to face the facts. Sharon moved Israel even further toward moderation and a readiness for compromise while the Palestinians have gone in the opposite direction, increasing hatred of Israel, intransigence, terrorism and the goal of total victory. The two sides are going to continue moving further apart in the future."

IV. "Message of the Hajj"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (January 8): "The West's war against 'terrorism' is really a war against Muslim extremism and not against Islam. With every violent outrage -- from New York and London to Baghdad and Jerusalem -- the Islamists are struggling not just to defeat Judeo-Christian civilization but to determine which of Islam's multitude of beliefs emerges paramount. It is for Muslims themselves to determine whether their faith, in this century, will be shaped by the likes of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and al-Qaida's fanaticism, or whether moderate views gain a hearing.... Such voices may still be faint and their influence limited, but we ignore their positive potential to our own detriment.... Which is why we see this Hajj season as a good time to remind ourselves of the need to welcome voices of reason and encourage Muslim theologians willing to engage Westerners in a spirit of mutual respect."